DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 689 FL 014 453

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TITLE What's in a Name? Attitudes toward Ms. and Other Courtesy Titles.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 15p.; Portions may be marginally legible due to poor print quality.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Interpersonal Communication; *Language Attitudes; Language Usage; Semantics; *Standard Spoken Usage; *Student Attitudes; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Address Forms

ABSTRACT

A survey of 99 female and 78 male college students regarding their attitudes toward titles of address for men (Mr.) and women (Miss, Mrs., and Ms.) had the students rate 10 concepts on 15 bipolar semantic differential scales. Nine of the concepts were neutral to the study's objectives, and the tenth was the concept of differential address for men and women. The scales used represented three universal components of affective meaning: evaluation, potency, and activity. It was found that on the evaluation scale, males and females agree that the four forms of address connote different degrees of goodness, with "Ms." receiving the lowest ratings. Comparisons showed "Ms." and "Mr." were rated lower than "Miss" or "Mrs." On the potency scale, males and females rated "Mr." lowest in potency, with "Ms." not siginificantly higher. Males rated "Mrs." significantly higher than the other three titles, while females rated "Miss" higher than the other three. On the activity measure, male and female subjects agreed that "Mr." and "Mrs." were lower in activity than "Miss" and "Ms.", with the latter receiving the highest absolute rating and "Mr." receiving the lowest. In sum, both males and females ascribed different affective meanings to the four forms of address on all three basic dimensions. However, no direct evidence was found in this study on whether these interpretations are extended to the titles' users. (MSE)

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What's in a Name?

Attitudes Toward Ms. and Other Courtesy Titles

by

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Running Head: Attitudes Toward Titles

Abstract

There are three courtesy titles for women in common use, Ms., Mrs., and Miss, compared to one, Mr., for men. How do people feel about these titles and persons who use them? College student subjects rated the titles on 15 semantic differential scales representing evaluation, potency, and activity. The four titles differed reliably in affective meaning. Females and males agreed in rating Ms. less good than Mr. or Miss and higher in activity than Mrs. or Mr., but disagreed on the potency factor. Implications for women s choice of titles are discussed.

There are three courtesy titles for women in common use, Ms., Mrs., and Miss, and only one comparable title, Mr., for men. The use of Ms. has been advocated by many feminists on the grounds that, like Mr., it leaves marital status unspecified and is therefore more suitable for the many business, professional and social interactions where marital status is irrelevant. Its use has not been without controversy, however. Miller and Swift cite many examples, including that of a 1974 memo from the Governor of New Hampshire to all secretaries employed by that state. (1) The memo banned the use of Ms.; the reason, according to news reports, was that the Governor did not "believe in" the title.

Judging by the above, courtesy titles can definitely evoke emotional responses in people. Ms., Mrs., and Miss are denotatively similar except on one dimension, that of marital status. But, given the emotionality sometimes provoked by a preference for Ms., it appears that they do not carry similar connotations.

Concepts that are denotatively similar are often connotatively quite different. For example, Jacobson compared four commonly used labels for the concept of women's political, economic and social equality (equal

rights for women, feminism, women's lib, and women's liberation) and found that her college-student subjects made clear distinctions on an evaluative dimension (e.g., right-wrong, good-bad, friendly-hostile). (2) When the concept was labeled "equal rights for women", it received relatively favorable evaluations; when labeled "women's liberation", ratings were lower.

Jacobson limited her comparisons of the labels to an evaluative dimension. However, a technique has been developed specifically to measure the affective components of word meanings on dimensions in addition to evaluation. The semantic differential technique, in which subjects rate a concept on a number of descriptive seven-point scales, is objective, quantitative, easily administered, and can accurately determine differences in affective meaning. (3)

A large body of research using the semantic differential technique has uncovered three basic dimensions of affective meaning: Evaluation (good-bad); Potency (strong-weak); and Activity (active-passive). Every word has some location on each of these dimensions for each of its users. The three dimensions have been found in more than 30 cultures and appear to be universals of affective meaning. (4)

The present study is an attempt to measure the affective meanings of the four most common courtesy titles using the semantic differential technique. We are all familiar with the denotative ("dictionary") meanings of the terms. But what are their subjective, affective meanings?

Method

Subjects and Procedure

Ninety-nine female and seventy-eight male undergraduates of West Chester State College participated in the experiment. Each subject rated ten concepts; nine were neutral with respect to the study (e.g., Dr., me, scientist) and one was an address form (Mr., Ms., Miss or Mrs.). Mr. was rated by 24 female and 20 male subjects, Ms. by 28 females and 17 males, Miss by 25 females and 20 males and Mrs. by 22 females and 21 males.

Subjects rated the concepts on 15 bipolar, semantic differential scales selected from the Osgood, May and Miron atlas of affective meaning to represent the three universal components of affective meaning. (5) Evaluation was represented by the scales nice-awful, sweet-sour, helpful-unhelpful, beautiful-ugly, and good-bad; potency by the scales big -little, powerless-powerful, shallow-deep, weak-strong, and high-low; and activity by the scales

fast-slow, noisy-quiet, young-old, dead-alive, and known-unknown. Subjects were presented with a booklet consisting of instructions and one page for each of the 10 concepts. Each concept appeared at the top of a page with the 15 rating scales below it. A separate random order of concepts was used in each booklet. The same random ordering of scales was used on each page. For seven of the scales the unmarked term was on the left; for eight it was on the right. The members of each pair were presented on opposite sides of the page on the same line, separated by a seven-point scale. The scales were unlabelled and subjects were instructed to "rate the words on the basis of what they mean to you by placing an X at the appropriate point on the scale."

The booklets were distributed by two female student experimenters who described the purpose of the experiment as "to discover the meaning of certain words by getting your rating of the words on a set of descriptive scales."

Results and Discussion

Mean ratings for each address form are presented in Table 1, separately for female and male subjects. Evaluation, potency and activity scores were summed over the appropriate 5 scales for each subject and means were

analyzed by three separate 2 X 4 (sex by address form) random group analyses of variance, using the method of unweighted means. Post hoc comparisons were performed using the Least Significant Difference test with alpha set at .05. (6)

Insert Table 1 about here

Evaluation

The results of the ANOVA indicate that male and female subjects agreed that the four forms of address connote different degrees of "goodness," with "Ms." receiving the lowest ratings. Post hoc comparisons showed that "Ms." and "Mr." were both evaluated lower than "Miss" or "Mrs." The meanings of "Miss" and "Mrs." were thus more positive in the evaluative (good-bad) sense for these subjects than the alternative form of address available to women, Ms."

Potency

ANOVA results showed highly reliable differences in potency ascribed to the four titles. In addition, there was a significant sex difference -- that is, male and female subjects disagreed on connotations of potency or power for the titles. Both males and females rated "Mr." lowest in

potency, with "Ms." not significantly higher. Males rated "Mrs." significantly higher than the other three titles, while females rated "Miss" higher than the other three.

Activity

As with the other two factors, there were reliable differences in connotative meaning of the titles. Male and female subjects agreed that "Mr." and "Mrs." were both lower in activity than "Miss" and "Ms.", with the latter receiving the highest absolute rating and "Mr." receiving the lowest.

The results can be summarized as follows: both male and female subjects ascribed different affective meanings to the four forms of address on all three basic dimensions: Evaluation, Potency, and Activity. Male and female subjects were in substantial agreement except for the Potency factor. Though the differences are small in absolute terms, they are highly significant and can be taken as reliable indicators of real differences in affective meaning of the titles among members of the population studied.

The differences can be informally characterized in terms of some of the scale items to provide a picture of the affective dimension of meaning for each of the titles. A "Mr." is viewed as not very good, nice, or sweet; not very

big or powerful; tending to be old, quiet, and slow. Most similar to "Mr." is "Ms." -- not very good, nice, or sweet; not very big or powerful; but in contrast to "Mr.", fast, noisy and young. The other two female titles are seen as better, nicer, and sweeter. Males view a Mrs. as big and powerful, while females ascribe these qualities more to a "Miss". Both sexes agree that a "Miss" is faster, noisier, and younger than a "Mrs".

In previous semantic differential research, subjects have distinguished between the concepts "woman" and "man" by rating women as better, less powerful, and more active than men. (7) It is interesting to compare the present ratings of male-female titles with these earlier ratings of "man" and "woman". On the activity dimension, there is almost perfect agreement: "Ms." and "Miss" are seen as more active than "Mr.", while "Mrs." is equally active. On the potency dimension, the results are contradictory: female titles are all rated equal or higher in potency than the male title by both male and female subjects. It is unlikely that the potency data reflect a belief that males are less powerful than females, given the perception of more power for "man" found by Jenkins et al. The finding that the traditional titles for women were seen as most powerful may indicate

that for the late adolescent/ young adult age group of our sample women's titles still connote authority and strength stemming from the salience of women as mothers and teachers. Certainly the counter-intuitive results obtained here suggest the need for further research on perceptions of power in courtesy titles.

The most stable and pure of the three affective dimensions of meaning is Evaluation, as reflected in the average factor loadings for E scale items (.93 in the present study) compared to P (.71) and A (.56). When the three female titles are compared on E to "Mr.", two of the three preserve the relationship observed in the earlier study -- as "woman" is better than "man", "Miss" and "Mrs." are better than "Mr." The title "Ms.", however, is less good. With respect to the evaluative dimension, a Ms. is no better than a male.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the four common forms of address have different affective meanings. The answer to this question is quite clear: THe titles do have significantly different values on all three of the universal dimensions of affective meaning, Evaluation Potency, and Activity. However, the present study provides no direct evidence on whether these differing

interpretations are extended to users of the titles. "Ms". is not very good when compared as an isolated concept with "Miss" or "Mrs". Do people judge a woman who uses the title Ms., then, as lower on an evaluative scale than one who uses "Miss" or "Mrs"? Similarly, is a "Mr. Jones" viewed as less active than a "Ms. Jones"? The answer to this type of question remains uncertain. In a later experiment, we asked subjects to evaluate the personalities of people who had supposedly written letters and signed them with one of the titles. Subjects did not attribute significant personality differences as a function of the title used.

Thus, conclusions about the merits of using one title in preference to another must necessarily be speculative. Still, women who choose to adopt the title Ms. or to use it in referring to others should be aware that while it connotes high activity it is also seen as less powerful by males and lower in an evaluative sense, that is, as less "good" than the traditional women's titles, by both males and females.

Notes

(1) Casey Miller and Kate Swift, Words and Women (Garden City NY: Anchor Press, Doubleday 1976).

(2) Marsha Jacobson, A Rose by Any Other Name: Attitudes Toward Feminism as a Function of Its Label, Sex Roles, 5 (1979), 365-371.

(3) Charles Osgood, George Suci and Percy Tannenbaum, The Measurement of Meaning (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957).

(4) Charles Osgood, William May and Murray Miron, Cross Cultural Universals of Affective Meaning (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1975)

(5) Ibid.

(6) B.J. Winer, Statistical Principles in Experimental Design, 2nd Ed. (New York;McGraw Hill, 1971).

(7) James Jenkins, Wallace Russell, and George Suci, "An Atlas of Semantic Profiles for 360 Words, American Journal of Psychology, 71 (1958), 688-699.

Footnote

The authors are grateful to Deborah Sardo and Linda English for help with data collection and to Robert Gentile for facilitating our use of computer services for data analysis and manuscript preparation.

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	Mean Ratings*				
Evaluation "bad" to "good"	Ms. 4.37	Mr. 4.38	Miss 4.88	Mrs. 4.94	Sex: $F(1,169) = 3.21$ $p < .08$ Title: $F(3,169) = 8.88$ $p < .00002$ Sex x Title: $F(3,169) = 2.54$ $p < .06$ Post Tests: Ms. Mr. Miss Mrs. **
Potency "powerless" to "powerful"	Males Mr. 3.91	Ms. 4.12	Miss 4.31	Mrs. 4.38	Sex: $F(1,169) = 14.83$ $p < .00002$ Title: $F(3,169) = 15.48$ $p < .000001$ Sex x Title: $F(3,169) = 1.82$ n.s. Post Tests (Males): Mr. Ms. Miss Mrs. Post Tests (Females): Mr. Mrs. Ms. Miss
	Females Mr. 4.03	Mrs. 4.15	Ms. 4.31	Miss 4.4	
Activity "slow" to "fast"	Mr. 4.20	Mrs. 4.37	Miss 4.60	Ms. 4.83	Sex: $F(1,169) = 1.56$ n.s. Title: $F(3,169) = 9.51$ $p < .00001$ Sex x Title: $F(3,169) = .99$ n.s. Post Tests: Mr. Mrs. Miss Ms.

*Where analyses of variance indicated no significant differences in the responses of male and female subjects their ratings are combined.

**Groups that do not differ from each other are underlined by a common line.